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SUBJECT: VFM LE VAN BANG OFFERS AMBASSADOR POSSIBLE GOOD RELIGIOUS FREEDOM NEWS, PROPOSES DATES FOR A PM VISIT

1. (SBU) Summary: In a pull-aside meeting at the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum in Halong City January 10, Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang passed the Ambassador proposed dates in late June 2005 for a visit to the United States by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and outlined three steps the GVN believed "could be done" on religious freedom, including the release of Father Ly and the opening of new churches in the Central Highlands. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador and Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang met on the margins of the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum in Halong City (septel) January 10. VFM Bang said he had traveled to Jakarta with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai for the tsunami-related summit meeting, and during that visit they had discussed the PM's possible trip to the United States. PM Khai, VFM Bang said, would like to visit the United States during the June 20-30 2005 timeframe. The PM's visit (the length of which is to be determined but which will probably not be a ten-day visit) would include Seattle, New York and Washington, DC, VFM Bang said. The GVN remains interested in a joint statement or other document summarizing the long-term framework for the bilateral relationship, he added, noting that the visit could be the occasion for the signing of documents "or other notable progress" on "commercial and economic issues of interest to the United States."

3. (SBU) Turning to the "CPC" decision, VFM Bang said the GVN is considering "three actions that could be accomplished" to improve religious freedom in Vietnam: the release of a "prominent figure such as Father Ly"; the opening of more churches and "allowing more space for unregistered groups to conduct religious activities" in the Central Highlands; and the release of implementing regulations for the ordinance on religion that would contain "clear language" making interference with the right to worship or belief criminally punishable. The Ambassador said that all of these actions would be welcome, as would other steps, including allowing the leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) to travel freely. The Ambassador noted UBCV's Thich Quang Do's desire to travel to Binh Dinh Province to visit Thich Huyen Quang during the Vietnamese New Year holiday in February. VFM Bang said he would look into it.

4. (SBU) VFM Bang closed by saying that he still hopes to visit Washington in March to work on the PM's trip. He added that Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan would be prepared to make another advance trip in May.

MARINE